

Thermal Tourism: Study of the Profile and Motivations of the Practitioner in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Health and wellness tourism had a growing interest in the Portuguese population until 2019. However, with the appearance of Covid-19, several establishments had to close over these two years, this segment being one of the most affected areas. Many water users looked forward to the opening of the spa resorts to continue their treatments. Given the importance of this theme, this work has as its main goal the definition of a consumer profile and to identify the determinants of satisfaction of the thermal tourists, as well as to gauge the degree of knowledge of thermal tourism and specifically of spas in the Portuguese context. In methodological terms, a questionnaire survey was conducted among the tourists to achieve the research objectives. The results show a younger, healthier and diversified thermal tourism practitioner. It also reveals similarities with other profile and motivations studies. However, it is possible to notice a few differences. Practitioners are seeking a combination of a leisure and health dimension and valorise factors such as location and access of the establishments, quality of the services provided and rest and tranquillity. An issue regarding their length of stay has been identified. As they are locals and live in the same country as the thermal spa, most respondents do not stay overnight at the destination. In the future, it would be interesting to research product development and market strategies for diversified thermal practitioners.

KEYWORDS

Health and Wellness Tourism, Thermal User's Profile, Thermal Spa, Tourism.

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1. Introduction

Health and wellness tourism has become an important part of the tourism dimension (Brandão, Liberato, Teixeira, & Liberato, 2021), known for being connected with leisure. According to Rodrigues et al. (2022a, p. 352), thermalism combines both health and wellness, as the activity delivers an improvement in the quality of life and a “complete state of well-being, physically and psychologically”. The thermalism market has been gaining credibility in recent years. As shown by Rodrigues et al. (2022b), there has been an increase in publications regarding health and wellness and its different subjects. One of the main topics being studied is in regards the profile of people who frequent thermal spas with the intent of knowing their motivations, socio-demographic profile, characteristics, needs and desires. Knowing these aspects of the user allows thermal destinations to identify strategies and guidelines to differentiate them and provides businesses with information regarding the type of products to supply (Antunes, Gonçalves, & Estevão, 2022). Understanding tourists’ perspectives permits the creation of a competitive advantage for both destinations and businesses.

Therefore, thermalism is about medicine and well-being, leading thermal bathers to seek new experiences and see thermal spas as a place of relaxation and leisure. Given the importance of this theme, the main research object is health and wellness tourism and its segmentation, with special attention to the case study of thermal tourism in Portugal. Specifically, this study aims to evaluate the relationship between tourism and thermal tourism and understand the frequency with which tourists visit these places, their satisfaction, and better define their profile, thus contributing to the importance of health and wellness tourism.

Given the importance of this theme, the main research object is health and wellness tourism and its segmentation, with special attention to the case study of thermal tourism in Portugal. This study was developed due to the relevance of this emerging theme and the need to identify the profile and motivations of thermal practitioners in Portugal. In this sense, this study aims to evaluate the relationship between tourism and thermal tourism and understand the frequency with which tourists visit these places and their satisfaction, as well as better define their profile, thus contributing to the importance of health and wellness tourism. The applied research methodology followed a mixed methods exploratory approach integrating qualitative elements and quantitative research seeking to capitalise on the complementary nature of both methods. Qualitative research is presented through documentary research, and the analyses extracted from quantitative and quantitative research are present in the application of the questionnaire survey. The main goal of this research instrument is to present a profile of the thermal spa users in Portugal and compare it with the existing literature and, therefore, identify differences and similarities with other established profiles and verify the evolution of the health and wellness tourism segment.

After this introduction, the study is structured into five additional sections. The second section focuses on the theoretical framework of the theme, while the third section presents the research methodology adopted. The fourth section presents and analyses the results of the collected data, and the fifth section presents a discussion of the results. Finally, the final considerations of the study are presented. Given the importance of this work, it is hoped that it may contribute to creating or improving services/programmes that correspond to the needs and preferences of spa visitors, thus trying to achieve higher levels of satisfaction and revisit the spa.

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2. Literature Review

Rodrigues et al. (2022a) have a study whose goal was to present a literature review and content analysis on thermalism studies found in well-known databases, namely Web of Science, Scopus, Science Direct, and PubMed. Their study aimed to explore the supply side, user profile, and market trends. According to the authors, the success of thermal establishments is related to the increase in the importance and regard given to health and well-being in recent decades. The authors identify three types of thermal es-

establishments that vary in their goals and functionality. There are Recreational, Wellness, and Therapeutic/Curative thermal establishments. Edlin and Golanty (2015) emphasised that the wellness segment is not just about the treatment of symptoms of illnesses. It also includes “self-healing, health promotion and the prevention of illness” (Edlin & Golanty, 2015, p. 354). It is also mentioned by Rodrigues et al. (2022a) that many consumers of wellness products and services are tourists, the reason why their research focuses on the motivations of wellness tourists. Table 1 summarises the different authors’ perspectives regarding motivations that Rodrigues et al. (2022a) analysed. The authors notice that regarding wellness consumers, we can study “not only their motivations but also their purchasing behaviours and the reasons behind their decisions to acquire wellness services” (Rodrigues et al., 2022a, p. 354).

Table 1. Literature Review on the Motivations of Wellness Tourists

Author	Study	Results
Dimitrovski and Todorović (2015)	Motivations for the Wellness market	Two groups: Socially Active and Self-focused tourists. Main motivations: socialisation, excitement, and relaxation.
Kesser et al. (2020)	The Wellness Tourist Motivation Scale	Seven dimensions: 1. Movement and Fitness; 2. Healthy Food and Diet; 3. Meditation and Mindfulness; 4. Rest and Relaxation; 5. Learning about Wellness; 6. Self-care; 7. Nature and Disconnect.
Kim and Yang (2021)	Motivations for booking a wellness hotel	Two groups: Seeking healing and Explorers of local history. One looks for a health dimension, the other seeks for a leisure dimension.
Kessler et al. (2020)	Motivations for wellness tourism by generation groups	Three groups: Baby boomers: “to look and feel better”; “to experience activities outdoors”. Generation X: “to escape the demands of everyday life”; “to experience activities outdoors”. Millennials: “to escape the demands of everyday life”; “to return to everyday life feeling rejuvenated”; “to feel grounded in nature”.
Aleksijevit (2019)	Motivations for selecting a wellness destination	Wellness trips are purchased through travel agencies. Tourists research destination’s facets and explore different review sites. They picture these reviews as a greater recommendation than word of mouth.
Strack and Raffay-Danyi (2020)	Factors to choose spas in the Hungarian market	There are four important factors: price, cleanliness of the facilities, types of pools and recommendation of family and friends.

Source: Rodrigues et al. (2022a)

Brandão, Liberato, Teixeira and Liberato (2021) have built a study to identify the motivations of tourists who practice thermal tourism, to understand the benefits they search for, how their socio-demographic profile affects their motivations, and how their motivations influence the trip’s characteristics. This study was applied to North and Central Portugal. They came to the conclusion that there is a relationship between the desired benefits of thermal tourists and their trip characteristics, such as group composition, overall motivation for the trip, chosen thermal destination, and the number of nights of stay. Rodrigues et al. (2022a), also referred that Brandão et al. (2021) concluded that the socio-demographic profile affects the motivations of tourists from this segment, the services provided, the determination of operations, the creation of new spa services, marketing and its strategy. Liberato et al. (2021) proclaim a connection between the services provided and the profile of thermal spa visitors in both the North and Central regions of Portugal. Table 2 presents studies mentioned by Rodrigues et al. (2022a) that describe the profile of thermal users/tourists. Most profile results indicate that people are mainly elderly and women with different educational levels and retired or full-time workers. Some are being supported by social security and/or insurance, others are following medical indications. Their monthly income is in a lower range, varying from less than 500 euros to a maximum of 2000 euros. Overall, younger people do not represent a significant market.

Table 2. Literature Review on Thermal Users/Tourists Profile

Author	Study	Results
Aleksijevic (2019)	Profile of wellness practitioners (generation groups)	Two groups: Generation X (35-54 years old) and Baby Boomers (55-74 years old). Characterised by high education level, higher average income, and preference for travelling with friends and family.
Strack and Raffay-Danyi (2020)	Frequent profile in Hungary's thermal spas	Families, the Elderly, and couples without dependent children. Young people are marked as an uncommon segment. The group that prevailed is people who are taking advantage of healing services through social insurance. A group with considerable numbers consists of people who are following their doctor's recommendation.
Esiyok et al. (2018)	Who is more likely to be in the segment?	Seniors are probable to be in thermal tourism than other age groups.
Dryglas and Rózycki (2017)	Profile of tourists visiting European Spa resorts	Beneficiaries of health insurance/ social security plans: older with chronic diseases. People who have no support and pay from their own means: are younger and healthier.
Pinos Navarrete et al. (2020)	Profile of tourists visiting a Southern Spanish Spa	Three groups: people supported by The Social Thermalism Programme (IMSERSO) with a stay between 10-12 days; individual thermalists who stay more than 4 days; a group of thermal tourists who stay less than 5 days. The largest number of users comes from the Social Thermalism group, and the group of thermal tourists is the one that increased the most. People from the programme IMSERSO have, in average, 72 years old. The private users (with no subsidy) also represent a significant part of the population over 65 years. The thermal tourists generally come in pairs, groups of friends and families.
Anaya-Aguilar et al. (2021)	Profile of spa tourists in Andalusia, southern Spain	The average age is 56, and in the majority females (61.8%). Their occupation is concentrated in two groups: retired (53.1%) and employed (34%). There are three groups in connection with their average monthly income: less than 500 euros (29.8%), between 501 and 1000 euros (33.1%) and between 1001 and 1500€ (26.6%). A bigger part of the sample related more to the low-income ranges.
Brandão et al. (2021)	Motivations to practice thermal tourism in the North and Centre of Portugal	Results show that thermal tourists are mostly women between the group ages of 55 and 64 years old and 65 and 74 years old. 25% of respondents have a higher education degree. Almost half are retired, and one-third have a monthly income of 1000 and 2000 euros.
Liberato et al. (2021)	Profile of thermal tourists in a pandemic context	Mainly female, and the ones aged between 45 and 54 years are increasing. Basic education, high school and university degrees are dominant among the respondents. Approximately 50% are retired/pensioners, and nearly 40% are full-time workers. 49.8% have an average monthly income of up to 1000 euros, and 33.8% between 1001 and 2000 euros.
Silvério et al. (2021)	Profile of thermal spa users in Chaves, Portugal.	The results show that 70% are women with an average age of 58 years. 44% have a higher education degree. The majority of individuals are retired, and Portuguese (80%). From these 72% are from the North region.

Source: Rodrigues et al. (2022a)

Vaz et al. (2022) administrated a study to design a profile on Chaves thermal spa's users and examine their experience as they're visiting the establishment. To understand the features of the user, they analysed socio-demographic information and identified characteristics, motivations, preferences, demeanours, and perceptions. Their results showed that the user of Chaves Thermal spa is a retired, married, or in a consensual union woman with an average age of 69 years old living in the north of Portugal. In fact, 63.7% of their sample was not new to Chaves Thermal spa as they have visited it before, which led them to conclude that people were satisfied with their experience and decided to visit the spa again. Indeed, 75.6% of respondents affirmed not visiting other thermal spas. Only 37.4% of thermal users prefer to take advantage of the spa services alone, as most come accompanied. Their average period of stay is 14 days. However, only 56.2% searched for a place to stay, which is explained by the fact that most people live in the same area as the spa. Their preferred time of the year to attend the spa is between July and September and October-November, as 44.4% and 42.5% of users chose these months, respectively. They valorise the company of family and friends during their stay. The respondents visit the spa seeking therapeutic thermalism services (64.5%) and for health reasons (57.7%). A small percentage (4.2%) visited the thermal

spa for leisure reasons. Over half of the respondents, 55.9%, found out about the Chaves Thermal spa program through medical advice. The medicinal quality of the water and the quality of the facilities are the most important aspects to the respondents for choosing a thermal spa. Other important aspects include the equipment's quality, quality of services supplied, service diversity, customisation of services, specialisation and techniques used, human resources' competence, knowledge, and availability.

Masiero et al. (2020 in Rodrigues et al. 2022a) provided the idea of thermal spas being structures with multi-specialisations, with a possible rehabilitation value, adequate staff for rehabilitation, and technologies with rehabilitative and assistive capacities. People who visit these thermal spas are mostly older, as seen before. Karagülle (2008 in Rodrigues et al. 2022a) shows the intended treatment for older people at thermal spas. The author mentions that their therapies can be seen from three distinct aspects. First, the antiaging effects, the preventive effects on processes of biological and physiological aspects that happen in older people, or the therapeutic effects over pathological issues. Next, the treatment, rehabilitation, and prevention of illnesses in older individuals and lastly, a complement to other types of treatment.

Rodrigues et al. (2022a) showcase three forecast trends for thermalism based on the content analysis of different literature. They envision that there will be an increase in demand for a dimension focused on prevention, well-being, and leisure. They also consider that the users' profile will change for a healthier, younger, and more diversified. For them, thermalism will have a high probability for tourism activity with the segments of thermal tourism and health and wellness tourism. Vaz et al. (2022) consider that tourism segments like thermal tourism and health and wellness tourism have contributed to the development of tourism in destinations worldwide. They establish that thermalism and tourism have a powerful relationship and refer to the leisure dimension under activities like tourism which improve health and well-being.

3. Methodology

The main goal of this research is to study the evolution of health and wellness tourism and its segmentation, with special attention to the case study of thermal tourism in Portugal. Given the research objectives, this research followed an exploratory, mixed-methods approach that integrates qualitative elements and quantitative research to capitalise on both methods' complementary nature. The quantitative research method is present in the application of the questionnaire survey, and the qualitative research is present through documentary research (the literature review presented previously) and the analyses taken from the quantitative research.

In this sense, a questionnaire survey was applied to thermal tourists. This survey was implemented online through the Google Forms tool and made available on social networks, namely Facebook, between July 20th and September 9th of 2021, having been shared in groups with themes of health and wellness and thermal spas. A pre-test was carried out on a small sample, and researchers related to tourism were consulted to better refine the measuring instrument. A probabilistic simple random sample was the sampling method utilised.

This instrument aims to assess the relationship between tourism and thermal spas and to understand how often tourists visit these places, how satisfied they are, and to further define their profile, thus contributing to the importance of health and wellness tourism. The target for this survey were individuals who practice thermal tourism. The main focus of this survey was to understand how often respondents go to the hot springs and whether they are satisfied with their visit. Questions on tourism practice were also elaborated in order to understand what kind of tourism people prefer and with whom they usually spend their holidays.

The survey was composed of 26 questions and divided into 3 sections. The participants answered by using a five-point Likert scale. Answering the survey wouldn't take longer than 10 minutes and was easily understood by the respondents. The different sections and questions were based of Vaz et al. (2022) empirical study to identify the user profile of a Portuguese Thermal SPA Establishment and the authors' interest. This empirical study appeared to be in line with the main goals of this paper and allowed for a direct comparison of results. The first section of the survey was related to the practice of tourism, where questions were asked about the type of tourism most practised, with whom the respondent usually travels, and what was the destination of the last trip. At the end of this first section, the respondents were

asked if they had ever visited a thermal spa, and all those who answered affirmatively were directed to the second section of the survey. If they had never visited a spa, they moved on to the third and last section concerning the socio-demographic profile. The second section, and the most relevant in this study, was related to the thermal practice, with questions about the last thermal resort visited, how they knew about it and therapeutic indications. The last section, as mentioned, is related to the respondent's socio-demographic profile, where they were asked about their age, nationality, and academic qualifications.

The survey received 208 responses, 74 of which correspond to individuals who have practised thermal tourism. IBM SPSS software, version 26.0, was used for the statistical treatment of the data. A descriptive analysis was conducted based on the results obtained with SPSS.

4. Results

This paper's qualitative results are shown in the literature review previously shown and will be compared to the results obtained with the quantitative method in the discussion. Based on this literature, the applied survey was developed and interpreted. As mentioned, given the objectives of the present study a questionnaire was applied to tourists. This questionnaire, in which data collection was carried out using the Google Forms, was made available on social networks, namely Facebook, between July and September 2021, having been shared in groups with themes of health and wellness and thermal spas, totalling a sample of 208 responses. As previously mentioned, given the objectives of the present study, a questionnaire was applied to tourists. For the application of this questionnaire, data were collected using Google Forms, which was made available on social networks, in groups with themes of health and wellness and thermal spas, between July and September 2021. The study sample totals 208 responses from tourists, of which 74 (35.6%) of the tourists have already performed the practice of thermal tourism.

This total sample, i.e. 208 tourists, seek out Sun and Beach Tourism on their trips, representing 39.4% of the responses. This type of tourism is followed by Cultural Tourism, Leisure Tourism and Nature and Adventure Tourism, in a remarkably close race, with 19.7%, 19.2%, and 18.3%, respectively. Only a non-significant percentage of the respondents stated that they seek Health Tourism in their activities. The results show that they prefer to go on holiday with other people, as 59.6% showed they travel with their family and 26% indicated their partner. Most stated that they travel 2 to 3 times a year (41.8%). However, a close value also stated that they travel only once a year (41.3%).

The respondents' last trip was within Portugal, having Algarve and The Azores as popular destinations. The most preferred foreign country was France. The main reason for their last trip was to go on vacation, with a crashing 71.2%. Visiting family/friends is also one of the reasons behind their latest travel (15.9%). Health and Wellness is the third most chosen reason (5.8%). When asked if they had ever attended a thermal spa, 64.4% sustained never been to one. The 35.6% of respondents who visited a thermal spa are divided into three categories. Those residing in a thermal spa destination are the most common answer (20.2%). Respondents who visited a thermal spa as a complement to their trip represent 12% of the answers, and only 3.4% have it as their goal for the trip. The Thermal SPA of Caldas das Taipas is the most mentioned by the group of people who have attended thermal spas before. People also referred to Thermal SPA of Gerês as their next favourite. Hungary was the most professed foreign country.

Since this study aims to construct a profile of people who attend thermal spas, the sample reduces to 74 of the 208 responses, representing the 35.6% previously mentioned. The motivations to practice Health and Wellness Tourism can vary. The results show that a Leisure and Relaxation motive is the most selected, as 62.2% of people chose it. Indicating that escaping from everyday stress, spending time with their family, and being "pampered" is their primary interest while visiting thermal spas. Health as motivation comes in second, picked by 16.2% of respondents. For some, both motivation factors were behind their intention on visiting a thermal spa, representing 13.5% of responses.

Half of the respondents indicated having no therapeutic indication for being in a thermal spa (50%). The other half is characterised by Rheumatic and Musculoskeletal issues, including problems from the Respiratory System. When individually selected these therapeutic indications for being in a thermal spa represent a total of 21.6% (10.8% each). However, if we look at the fact that people could choose more

than one option, making different combinations, it is possible to conclude that a Rheumatic and Musculo-skeletal indication was the most paired option.

Overall, the "Recommendation from family and friends" is the reason the respondents found out about the spa's thermal program they last visited (35.1%). Significantly 25.7% found out about the program through the Internet, and only 17.6% were following Medical Advice. The promotion made by the thermal spa itself allowed 16.2% of respondents to find out about its program.

The time of year most convenient for visiting a thermal spa, according to the total amount of times selected, even through combinations, is Spring (April - June). If you look at the individual response (without combining other times of the year), Summer (July - September) represents 20.3% of responses, and Spring comes in second with 18.9%. The preferred combinations by the respondents are Autumn (October - November) and Winter (December - March) with 9.5%, and Autumn and Spring with 6.8%.

While visiting their latest thermal spa establishment, the respondents took into consideration a few aspects. Location and Access were selected by 50 of the 74 inquired. The Quality of Services Provided and Rest and tranquillity were the second and third most selected aspects, respectively (30 and 29 times). The combination of Location and Access, Service Prices, and Recommendations from family and/or friends is the most selected by the respondents (5.4%).

A massive percentage of the inquired (75.7%) affirmed to not staying overnight at their thermal destination. However, 10.8% stated staying 1 to 2 nights, and 8.1% mentioned spending 3 to 5 nights at the destination. When asked where they spent the night, 12.2% answered the Hotel, 5.4% mentioned their Family and Friends' House and 5.4% referred to a Local Accommodation.

The respondents showed interest in returning and recommending the last spa they visited family and friends, as 81.1% answered yes and 18.9% said maybe. Only 27% of respondents affirmed thinking about visiting another thermal spa in the near future. The thermal spa of Gerês and São Pedro do Sul were the most referred to as the next thermal spa to visit.

When specifically asked about the Thermal Spa of Caldas das Taipas, 59.4% affirmed knowing the place. From this, 18.9% knew about it but never visited it, the remaining 40.5% of the value knew about it and had previously visited it. However, 40.5% of respondents have never heard of Caldas das Taipas Thermal Spa.

The social demographic features of the respondents show that 71.6% of individuals are women, on average 35 years old, and 56.8% of people are single. The respondents' nationality is Portuguese (91.9%), and mostly resided in the North of Portugal (59.5%). The majority (56.8%) have higher education and have a household size of four people (39.2%). They are employed (52.7%) and students (32.4%). Only a small percentage of respondents are Pensioners or retired (5.4%). Their average net monthly income is between 666 and 1300 euros (25.7%). Comparing the social demographic features of this reduced sample to the previous total will allow us to make conclusions regarding the differences and the impact of thermal spa users on the overall tourists.

Table 3 results are presented to allow comparison between the total sample and the thermal tourists sample. The mean age of 208 of the sample is 26 years, which differs from the 35 thermal users, meaning that the thermal users are older individuals. However, it is possible to conclude that the socio-demographic profile of the individuals is similar to the two samples.

Table 3. Socio-demographic Profile of the Thermal Tourists and the Total Sample of Tourists

Social Demographic Features	Sample	Total Sample
	74	208
Category	Percentage	Percentage
Gender		
Feminine	71.6%	71.6%
Masculine	28.4%	28.4%
Marital Status		
Married / Non-marital partnership	36.5%	31.7%
Separated / Divorced	6.8%	4.3%
Single	56.8%	63.9%
Education		
Basic Education (1st to 3rd cycle)	10.8%	9.6%
High School (10th to 12th grade)	32.4%	36.1%
Higher Education	56.8%	54.3%
Nationality		
Brazilian	5.4%	9.1%
German	1.4%	0.5%
Italian	1.4%	0.5%
Portuguese	91.9%	88.9%
Other	X	1%
Residency in Portugal		
North	59.5%	63%
Centre	8.1%	5.3%
Lisbon and Tagus Valley	4.1%	9.1%
Algarve	1.4%	1%
Azores	18.9%	10.1%
Madeira	1.4%	0.5%
Other	6.8%	11.1%
Household size		
1	9.5%	8.7%
2	17.6%	16.3%
3	28.4%	24.5%
4	39.2%	40.4%
5 or more	5.4%	10.1%
Employment situation		
Domestic	1.4%	0.5%
Employee	52.7%	51.4%
Pensioner / Retired	5.4%	1.9%
Self-employed	6.8%	8.7%
Student	32.4%	31.3%
Unemployed	1.4%	4.3%
Intern	X	0.5%
Working student	X	1.4%
Average net monthly income		
Up to 665€ (national minimum wage)	8.1%	11.1%
666 – 1300€	25.7%	30.3%
1301 – 2000€	23%	21.2%
2001 – 3000€	14.9%	13%
3001 or more	5.4%	5.8%
I prefer not to say	23%	18.8%

Source: Own Elaboration

5. Discussion

The literature showed three future trends for thermalism, one of them being the change in practitioners' profiles for a healthier, younger, and diversified version (Rodrigues et al., 2022a). The study's results indicate that the average age of the user was 35, differentiating from studies like Vaz et al. (2022). It's also shown that only a small percentage of respondents are pensioners or retired (5.4%), which is different from the literature. Almost all studies mentioned by Rodrigues et al. (2022a) mark younger individuals as an uncommon segment.

Our results also show that half of the respondents have no therapeutic indication for being at a thermal spa, which correlates with the fact that they are healthier individuals with no specific issues to seek treatment. Our user is also diversified as it is not homogeneous. Even with other indicators prevailing in the different categories, it is noticeable that they vary in their marital status, education, household size, employment situation, and average net monthly income. However, our results aren't much different from other studies mentioned above.

The prevalence of women as the main user of thermal spas, their higher education, the fact that their nationality and residency consist with the location of thermal spa frequented, and their monthly income is in the lower brackets consists with the literature. Another thermalism trend was for health and wellness tourism to become a segment relevant to the activity (Rodrigues et al., 2022a). Our study considered health and wellness the third most chosen reason for the 208 individuals' last trip, only below vacation and visiting family/friends.

Research shows that people's motivations can be for both health and leisure dimensions, involving seeking healing, socialisation, relaxation, escaping from the demands of daily life, etc. (Rodrigues et al., 2022a). Our results put leisure and relaxation as the primary motivation, in fact, over 62.2% of people who visited thermal spas indicated it. Health comes in as the second motivation (16.2%), and only 13.5% chose both motivations. The combination of these two motivations is in line with the trend identified by Rodrigues et al. (2022a), which stated an increase in demand for a dimension focused on prevention, well-being, and leisure. Literature indicated four factors to choose spas in the Hungarian market: price, cleanliness of the facilities, types of pools, and recommendation of family and friends (Rodrigues et al., 2022a). Our sample preferred different factors. They mainly care for the location and access of the establishments, following the quality of services provided and rest and tranquillity. The results also differ from the literature regarding their length of stay at the thermal destination. Vaz et al. (2022) mentioned an average stay of 14 days, and other studies referred by Rodrigues et al. (2022a) indicate a variance between less than 5 days to 10-12 days. However, 75.7% of our respondents affirmed not staying overnight at their thermal destination. This could be explained by the fact that over half of respondents who visit thermal spas are residents of the spa destination. Vaz et al. (2022) noticed that 63.7% of their sample was not visiting Chaves thermal spa for the first time, our results show that 81.1% of respondents have the intention of returning and recommending their last thermal spa to family friends, showing the same loyalty referred by their study.

Because our study is composed of two different samples separated by being or not being a thermal spa practitioner, it is possible to notice that both profiles are similar with no significant differences. This could showcase the intent to join the leisure dimension with the health dimension regarding health and wellness tourism, as was stated in the literature. As our results showcase a lot of similarities with other studies, it's also subtly noticeable a few differences. These differences follow the trends mentioned by Rodrigues et al. (2022a).

6. Conclusions and Implications

This article has presented different motivations, characteristics, and socio-demographic profiles for thermal practitioners. It also presented a relation between the trends identified by Rodrigues et al. (2022a) and the socio-demographic changes showcased in this study. In a simple way, it displays literature reviews of relevant topics for this paper allowing a better comparison and discussion of results. The goal of creating a profile and identifying motivations for thermal tourism practitioners in Portugal was achieved. The preference for thermal tourists is based on the direct connection identified in the literature of leisure

activities and health and wellness. Tourists are not only seeking leisure and relaxation but also health-related treatments.

Our study's Portuguese thermal tourism practitioners are mainly single women with an average age of 35 years old and higher education. They are Portuguese, living in the North of Portugal with a household size of 4 individuals. They are employed and students with an average net monthly income between 666 and 1300 euros. These practitioners travel to thermal spas for leisure and relaxation to escape from everyday stress, spend time with their family, and be pampered during Summertime (July-September). They also don't have any therapeutic indications for attending the spa and found it through recommendations from family and friends. The practitioners attribute more importance to location and access, followed by quality of services provided and rest and tranquillity. They don't stay overnight at the thermal spa destination, but they intend to return and recommend the establishment to family and friends.

It is possible to conclude that there are visible similarities with the studies presented in this paper. However, our results appear to follow the three trends presented by Rodrigues et al. (2022a). This means that our study's thermal spa practitioners are younger, healthier, and diversified. They seem to be seeking a leisure, well-being, and prevention dimension of thermalism, implying an increase in demand for these aspects. Lastly, they show that thermal tourism and health and wellness tourism are a high potential for tourism activity as our general sample put health and wellness as the third reason for their last trip.

Concluding, our study reveals the start of a change in the health and wellness market. With younger, healthier, and more diversified individuals, destinations and thermal spa establishments have in their hands an interesting challenge. They need to be able to establish strategies to guarantee the satisfaction of their overall practitioners and provide adequate products. They're not only younger individuals but also locals and residents in the same country as the thermal spas visited, which affects their length of stay as noted in our study. In this case, the challenge is figuring out how to retain these individuals for longer and attract foreign visitors.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about strong changes and impacts throughout the world. The tourism sector and, specifically, thermal spas was one of the sectors most affected by the pandemic since they were the first to close doors and the last to reopen again. The economic impacts on this sector were quite significant. Therefore, the future of thermal tourism has the challenge to reinvent and adapt to this new reality, allowing the sector to recover. Fundamentally, the spa is considered an opportunity and a new market niche. The main concern is to increase the length of stay and make them have the best experience possible. The future of thermal spas is still uncertain. However, the best in new products and services has been a reality and, as previously mentioned, although the thermal spas are closed, a bet has been made on the dissemination and promotion of the thermal spas as a way to attract customers. This study seeks to contribute to the sector's strategic planning.

The main limitation of this study is the sample size. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the questionnaire survey was not applied directly at a thermal spa establishment which would give more accurate information. This issue led the study to be applied through Google forms and shared on several social media means, which include social media groups about health and wellness, thermalism, thermal spas, and similar topics. With such a small sample, we cannot say that this is a meaningful statistic and that it represents the total population. However, it does not mean that it is irrelevant to the research topics as it provides interesting information about practitioners of thermal tourism. Covid-19 also led to the closure of thermal spas and other establishments which didn't allow in-person contact with the respondents.

For future research, it would be interesting to note if the same thermalism trends from Rodrigues et al. (2022a) are showcased in the practitioners' profile. Studies regarding possible differences in the user's profile of thermal spa establishments after the Covid-19 pandemic would also bring relevant information to the matter. The virus SARS-Cov2 brought even more attention to individuals' health and wellness status. Identifying possible paradigm shifts in the thermal tourism segment between the before and after of the pandemic should also be considered. Plus, research on product development and market strategies for these diversified practitioners would also be intriguing.

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